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DE RUEHUJA #0971/01 1511451
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 301451Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2952
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0515
RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 0909
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 0136
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 9304
RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000971

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/29/2033
TAGS: PGOV PINR KISL SOCI NI IR
SUBJECT: (C/NF) NIGERIA: IRANIAN ATTEMPTS TO COUNTER
WAHHABIST INFLUENCE

REF: A. ABUJA 970
 B. ABUJA 701

Classified By: A/Pol/C Heather Merritt, reasons 1.4 (b, c & d).

¶1. (S//NF) SUMMARY: Reports that Nigerians may be studying Shi'ism at the Imam Hussein Foundation in Ghana may open up opportunities for the growth of Shi'ism in this traditionally-Sunni region. Iranian attempts at promoting Shi'ism in Nigeria (which began in the 1980s when Iran trained and funded Shi'ite leader Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, see Ref A) are meant to counter an established connection to the Sunni Islamic world, particularly with Saudi Arabia and Saudi Wahhabist influence. Given Iran's deep-rooted Sufi tradition, and the entrenchment of Sufism across West Africa, Nigerian (and West African) Muslims who historically have been (for the most part) adherents of Sufism may find a degree of commonality with Shi'ism as opposed to Saudi Wahhabism, which is inimical to Sufism. Although only a handful of Nigerians may be studying at the Imam Hussein Foundation at present, this trend appears significant, in light of its potential to contribute to intra-religious discord among Muslims in Nigeria, and merits further monitoring including across the West African region. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S//NF) Kaduna-based Shaykh Sanusi Khalil (strictly protect), who oversees the training of Sunni imams aged 22-35 throughout northern Nigeria, intimated to PolOff May 19 that several of his students from Kaduna and Kano are currently studying at a private Iranian Shi'a seminary in Ghana, the Imam Hussain Foundation. The institution, which was established in Accra in 1984, sponsors West African students to study Shi'ism and Arabic, modeling itself after prominent Shi'a seminaries in Najaf and Qum. Khalil remarked that given Nigeria's dilapidated and limited Islamic educational institutions, Nigerians have had to travel to foreign countries (specifically, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, and Sudan) to obtain religious instruction. However, since Nigerian Islam is predominantly Sunni, Khalil averred, it appears unusual, even "troubling" that some of his students

have decided to study Shi'ism rather than further their studies of Sunni Islam, either in Nigeria or elsewhere in the Middle East. Khaliel attributed the interest in studying Shi'ism, at least for some of his students, to a desire to learn more about the wider Islamic world and its various philosophical and religious currents. Since Shi'ism is not taught in Nigeria, Khaliel posited, there is a natural attraction for individuals to learn about something that is different or more exotic than what is available in their immediate intellectual milieu.

¶3. (S//NF) Khaliel questioned how these young Nigerians learned about the Imam Hussain Foundation in Ghana since, to his knowledge, the organization does not maintain an office in Nigeria. While PolOff attended a seminar last year in Abuja convened under the auspices of the "Imam Hussain Foundation" on the architect of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, PolOff could not determine whether this event was connected to the Foundation in Ghana. Shi'ism remains widely unpopular among Nigerian Muslims, especially in light of Nigeria's strong tradition of Sunni Islam and connection to the Sunni Islamic world. However, since Sufism is practiced widely across Nigeria, Nigerian (and West African) Muslims may recognize synergies with Iranian Shi'ism's own tradition of Sufism. While this does not necessarily connote an acceptance to Shi'ism for Sunni Muslims, it certainly may help to attenuate prevailing, primarily Saudi, Wahhabist dominance in Nigeria. Although only a small number of Nigerians may be studying at the Imam Hussain Foundation at present, this trend appears significant

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and merits further monitoring and analysis, including across the West African region.

¶4. (C//NF) Although historically Sunni, Nigeria was first introduced to Shi'ism in the 11th century by itinerant Islamic scholars from Egypt's al-Azhar seminary, which, at the time, was dominated by the Shi'a Fatimid Empire (Ref B). In the pre-modern Islamic world, legal schools of Islamic thought, whether Sunni or Shi'a, reflected a caliph's prestige, influence, and diplomatic relations. An empire's capacity to spread its interpretation of Islamic orthodoxy through trade or preaching was a mechanism through which it extended its commercial and political prowess. While Shi'ism ultimately had greater success in East Africa, contemporary motivations for Iran to establish greater ties with West Africa have as much to do with the global economy as with religion.

¶5. (S//NF) COMMENT: The use of Arabic as the principal medium of instruction for students at the Imam Hussain Foundation is a break from Iranian tradition since Shi'a scholarship in Iran is primarily taught in the Persian language. However, since Arabic remains an authoritative and legitimizing medium for imams and Islamic leaders in Nigeria, an emphasis on Arabic in any Islamic educational curriculum is not only authenticating, but also fundamental to the sustainability and expansion of Islam in the region. The efforts of the Imam Hussain Foundation may allow Shi'ism to neutralize prevailing Wahhabist dominance in West Africa by training its students to return to their societies in West Africa capable of competing with other Arabic-speaking (though Sunni) preachers and Islamic scholars.

¶6. (S//NF) COMMENT CONT'D: Yet, the growth of Shi'ism in Nigeria is not inherently problematic, even for a country with a strong tradition of Sunni Islam. For the pursuit of Islamic religious instruction remains prosaic and laudable for northern Nigerians and Shi'ism is recognized at least by Nigerian Islamic scholars as a legitimate Islamic sect, despite their aversion to it. Intra-religious violence among Muslims in Nigeria heretofore has reflected competition for followers and prominence, not disagreements in doctrine or theology. Should Nigerian Islam's landscape tilt, however, and competing claims of authenticity between Sunni and Shi'a

Muslims focus on contentious issues of doctrine, without also allowing rhetorical and political space for those disagreements to be articulated and negotiated, discord and hostility may likely follow. END COMMENT.

SANDERS